



Below: the North Tower burning as the second plane approaches. Right: Dan Daly, now 62, retired as fire chief in 2002



# I WENT TO 343 FUNERALS AFTER 9/11 BUT MY LIFE IS BETTER FOR IT

As battalion chief of the New York City Fire Department, Dan Daly was on duty that terrible day in 2001 when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. Ten years later, he is on a worldwide peace mission. As told to **Diana Timmins**

**B**efore I became a firefighter I was a school teacher. I joined the fire department at age 30 in 1978, after my closest friend, Steve Belson, convinced me to take the test with him. I found it infinitely less stressful running into a burning building than entering a classroom in the South Bronx!

"It was a job that gave me a sense of love and empathy for other people, which was heightened after September 11. That day is part of who I am now.

"Arriving [at Ground Zero] was like landing on another planet. A pile of rubble stood 25 metres high and seven hectares wide. Everything was covered in thick white dust. People ran around covered with blood and with a look of shock on their faces.

"A firefighter walked up to me out of the dark smoke and said: 'Father Mike [their chaplain] is dead'. Then another said: 'Captain Brethel is dead'. And another: 'Your mate, Steve Belson, is missing'. He was later confirmed dead as well.

"Part of our most traumatic duty was going around with buckets to find human remains. If we saw what looked like a rock, we had to touch it with a shovel. If it was soft, we would delicately put it in a bucket and bring it over to the makeshift morgue.

### **The aftermath**

"For months I wore the smell of decomposing bodies mixed with burning insulation from the wires. I could shower and shower, but then sneeze and it would come right up through my nostrils.

"I had 343 funerals to attend for the firefighters who were killed. In front of me would be a child wailing, holding their father's helmet; wives sobbing; bagpipes playing *Amazing Grace* and the bugles playing *Taps*.

"Many days in the firehouse I'd expect to see one of my friends walk in, forgetting they had died. That's partly why I retired in December 2002. It became a different place for me, and I knew I could do better things outside.

"I believe at the end of the grieving process our energy needs to turn towards good. That's why I developed my 'peace mission' – working with the Children's Wish Foundation [a charity that grants wishes to children with life-threatening illnesses] and wounded veterans, and speaking at schools, universities and community groups in over 200 cities internationally to share my message of peace, hope and tolerance.

"Several years after September 11, I developed *The Five Golden Keys to Happiness and Success* in response to the need I saw in young people. These keys are: develop your talents, be kind, volunteer, make wise choices and walk with an attitude of gratitude.

"Last year, Father Peter McGrath and the Passionist Family Group Movement invited me to Australia, funded me and accommodated me in members' homes. I gave 44 presentations to schools around Australia.

"In the US, September 11 is now a national day of service and

volunteering. In the weeks following September 11, volunteers set up the tent city along the Hudson River where you could get a pair of boots, underwear, even a hug. The sense of community made it a special place; there was a spirituality that arose like a phoenix from the ashes. For me, that became the legacy of September 11: not what people could destroy, but what can be built when we come together as one team and one mind.

### **Moving toward sunlight**

"I was at Ground Zero the day I heard Osama bin Laden had been killed. For so long that place had been synonymous with destruction and injustice. Now there was at least a modicum of relief, like turning the corner on a hot day and getting a cool breeze on your face. I looked at the new towers like a flower blossoming from where so many people had lost their lives, knowing the person responsible had been caught and justice served.

"I will continue my mission to let people know that on the other side

of horror and destruction there is sunlight, and we can move toward that sunlight. My partner Annie is a Montessori school teacher and we are very much aligned in this mission. Her favourite expression is, 'If we want to change our world, we have to start with the youngest and most impressionable among us.'

"I believe we can change the world if we start every morning saying to ourselves, 'Thank God for this beautiful day, that I have precious moments to share with the people I love and serve the people in my life.'

"I have done some wild things to percolate a feeling of peace and happiness, but nothing can give peace like reaching out to another human being. I've never felt better about my life and the role I play as I do now." **b**

**+ Dan Daly does presentations free of charge in memory of those who lost their lives on September 11.**  
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